

# ‘Surrealism Found Me’: British Surrealism and Encounter

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THE WORK OF SURREALISM IN BRITAIN has been remembered via a certain kind of anecdotal history.<sup>1</sup> It is all too easy to find our attention drawn towards British surrealism’s tall tales or quirks, only to discover that these eccentric stories seem to float, almost independently, from the movement they were ostensibly attached to, lacking a critical framework to ground them. This problem of detachment is understandable, for several reasons: first of all, that the anecdotes themselves are really very good. They reward retelling, reproduced in retrospective interviews, told at second or third hand, mutating and leaking out their truthfulness over time. Who could forget, for instance, the story of British surrealists garnering publicity for an exhibition by ringing up Selfridges en masse to ask for a definition of surrealism?<sup>2</sup> Or resist the image of George Melly concluding a poetry reading by throwing cutlery over himself, or Desmond Morris lugging an elephant’s skull around the streets of Birmingham?<sup>3</sup> But this detachment may also be attributed to British surrealism’s own sense of incohesion: the uncertainty of when surrealism arrived in Britain, and whether it ever left; whether it ‘failed’ – and, most of all, what it was. Looking back unfavourably in 1947, E. L. T. Mesens and J.-B. Brunius, in a ‘Déclaration du Groupe Surréaliste en Angleterre’, blamed

<sup>1</sup> This essay follows David Gascoyne’s suggestion, as noted by Paul Nash, that ‘surrealist art with a capital “S” should refer to the work of those who belong to the specific Surréaliste group’, while works produced outside this Surréaliste ambit or under the broader influence of Surréalisme, carry a small ‘s’. Paul Nash, ‘Swanage or Seaside Surrealism’, in Andrew Causey (ed.), *Writings on Art* (Oxford 2000) pp. 125–9: 129–30. I am grateful to Helen Thaventhiran, Vidya Venkatesh, Ellie Mitchell, Georgia Thurston and Rob Newton for their guidance in drafting this essay.

<sup>2</sup> See Leo Mellor, *Reading the Ruins: Modernism, Bombsites and British Culture* (Cambridge 2011) p. 87.

<sup>3</sup> See Silvano Levy, ‘Maddox, the Melvilles and Morris: Birmingham Surrealists’, in *Surrealism in Birmingham 1935–1954* (Birmingham 2011) pp. 23–36.

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La structure très décentralisée de la société anglaise – qui, historiquement, pourrait être opposée à l'extrême concentration de toutes les activités françaises sur Paris, qu'elles soient administratives ou intellectuelles, – n'a jamais favorisé la création dans ce pays d'un groupe Surréaliste cohérent.<sup>4</sup>

Mesens and Brunius singled out 'l'éclectisme de Herbert Read' and 'les mystifications de [David] Gascogne', and ridiculed Humphrey Jennings's OBE.<sup>5</sup> There is something plainly funny about the British surrealists writing to the French ones, in French, to apologise for doing so badly, pinning it both on unmovable national structures and the behaviour of a few. British surrealism had lacked the singular mouthpiece of André Breton, with his *Surréaliste* manifestos of 1924 and 1929, the clear immediate parent of Dadaism, or even a comparable geographical concentration. British surrealist participants were more scattered, with significant stations in Birmingham as well as London, and they were often – as Mesens and Brunius suggest – more interested in exploring or engaging with surrealism alongside ongoing literary and artistic activities rather than committing exclusively to it.<sup>6</sup> From anecdotes, then, we may feel we know the pieces, traces, and trappings of British surrealism, but lack a picture of the whole. These pieces or trappings, however, are not a distraction from writing about surrealism in Britain. Rather, they can be centred as a critical formula for understanding how the movement manifested itself over the Channel, from the late 1920s until – at least – the late 1940s. This essay brings *Surréaliste* theories of encounter, chance, and play to bear on how writers and artists came across surrealism in Britain, and how British surrealism understood itself.

It is tricky to manage, account for, describe, or write about the phenomenon of surrealism as it appeared in Britain, drip-fed into cultural consciousness in the later 1920s, developing more fully during the 1930s, and later finding itself outdone by war in the 1940s. British surrealism is perceived to have been too disparate, distracted, and divided to really

<sup>4</sup> E. L. T. Mesens, J.-B. Brunius, et al., 'Déclaration du Groupe Surréaliste en Angleterre', in *Le Surréalisme en 1947: Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme, présentée par André Breton et Marcel Duchamp* (Paris 1947), pp. 45–7 : 45. 'The highly decentralised structure of English society – which, historically speaking, could be opposed to the extreme concentration of both French activities to Paris, be they administrative or intellectual – has never favoured the creation, in this country, of a coherent surrealist group.'

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>6</sup> See Tessa Sidey, "'Boogie Woogie on a Higher Plane": A Local Context for the Birmingham Surrealists', in *Surrealism in Birmingham*, pp. 15–22.

constitute a ‘movement’ at all – hence the prevalence of its anecdotal traces, as technicolour fragments of an artistic apparatus that, apparently, stood only temporarily. As critics, we do not seem to know what British surrealism was; though hardly to its detriment, British surrealism didn’t really seem to know what it was either. This fundamental confusion, however, is central to how we ought to conceive of British surrealism: as a mood, effect, experiment, or costume, which you might encounter or associate with, or even be influenced by without quite knowing. Leo Mellor has argued for surrealism in Britain to be understood ‘as a source, not a doctrine; as a template, not a movement’.<sup>7</sup> Neither particularly exclusive nor organised, surrealism could be drawn on or toyed with by a wide array of writers and artists; it could manifest as explosive artistic confrontation, and could also be found hiding in plain sight. Managing British surrealism with sensitivity to its disparateness and productive vagueness calls for a critical reimagining: one which does away with the idea that it was a monolith, or an experiment gone wrong, and which instead understands it as a sensibility picked up differently by different artists.

Critics have acknowledged British surrealism’s slipperiness, or difficulty: Michel Remy has noted that British surrealism shared ‘the essential intransigence, the anonymous, drifting quality of surrealism in general’.<sup>8</sup> Remy’s 1999 *Surrealism in Britain* is a comprehensive study of the movement’s proponents in Britain from the 1920s onwards, and manages its subject by tracing the various paths of surrealist artists rather than reflecting especially on British surrealism’s existential faultlines. The critical alternative to Remy’s history has previously been to treat British surrealism as a failed endeavour or eccentric indulgence. Paul Ray’s *Surrealist Movement in England* (1971), knowledgeable and entertaining, is also oblique and rather scolding. Ray ends his book critically: ‘By insisting that surrealism was really *only* romanticism in a new guise, they missed the point of Breton’s calling surrealism the prehensile tale [*sic*] of romanticism.’<sup>9</sup> Ray’s conclusion is a severe simplification of British surrealism’s various examinations of its own genesis or canonicity; with the assertion that ‘the English did not need surrealism to do what it had always been possible for them to do’, Ray can dismiss British surrealism’s apparent false starts, and gradual decline, as a self-fulfilling prophecy.<sup>10</sup> Susan Laxton’s recent work on surrealism and

<sup>7</sup> Mellor, *Reading the Ruins*, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Michel Remy, *Surrealism in Britain* (Aldershot 1999) p. 21; id., ‘Introduction: Hearts on Fire in the Snow: A Brief History of Surrealism in Britain’, in Michel Remy (ed.), *On the Thirteenth Stroke of Midnight: Surrealist Poetry in Britain* (Manchester 2013) pp. 1–6: 5.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Ray, *The Surrealist Movement in England* (Ithaca, NY 1971) p. 308.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

playfulness may be helpful here in establishing the point that surrealism and uncertainty have always gone hand in hand. 'Ludic ambivalence and equivocation offered the surrealists a suspended, threshold space for representation', she notes, so forming 'a waking analogue to the liminal states of the unconscious: dreams and half sleep, the restless figuring of the subject in formation; the ephemeral, the unforeseeable, the as-yet-ungrasped.'<sup>11</sup> Surrealism's presence in Britain was not an exam, subject to pass or fail; it was, however, a kind of 'threshold space', in Laxton's phrase, where both 'ambivalence' and 'equivocation' over surrealism's purposes and definitions were not weaknesses but in fact created opportunities for the surrealist spirit to move laterally and diffusively among other artistic practices of the 1930s.

One way of considering British surrealism, then, would be via a theory of encounter. This would involve examining British surrealist work which focused its attention on the encounter as artistic process, but also reflecting on how the phenomenon of 'surrealism' was encountered in Britain. To bring a theory of encounter to surrealism in Britain is to centre the relevance of both contingency and happenstance to Surréalisme's anglophone counterpart. The encounter is capable of turning the everyday into the revelatory, and the revelatory into the everyday. Laxton refers to the surrealist practice of '*le hasard objectif*, or "objective chance"':

in which the strolling surrealist experiences the projection of his own psychic recollections as the shock of inexplicable attractions, an unnameable recognition thought to be jolted directly out of the unconscious by an unexpected encounter with a figure, place, or object.<sup>12</sup>

These 'chance encounters and coincidences', Remy notes, 'signified in themselves the short-circuiting of reason, the elision of all deliberate choices, and the crystallised expression of the secret laws of the subconscious', the surrealist encounter constituting 'a desire which is suddenly, magically made manifest'.<sup>13</sup> 'Objective chance' is a pun, encompassing in its ambit both that which is *objectively* a chance encounter, and also an encounter with a specific *object*. Laxton's 'strolling surrealist' is a figure familiar to surrealism in Britain, even as he may also recall the *flâneurs* of Paris: Paul Nash, Herbert Read, and Eileen Agar all practised their art, or critical thinking on the move, at times. We may also involve the corollary of the

<sup>11</sup> Susan Laxton, *Surrealism at Play* (Durham, NC 2019) p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>13</sup> Michel Remy, 'The Entrance of the Medium', in David Gascoyne, *A Short Survey of Surrealism* (London 2003) pp. 13–22: 14–15.

'browsing surrealist': a reader flicking through a magazine of the late 1920s or 1930s, who stumbles across surrealist work incorporated alongside broader Anglo-American modernisms. Displaced in London, or further afield throughout Britain, surrealism was encountered by artists, writers, and readers, strolling or browsing – a phantom predestined, it seems, to drift from strictly Surréaliste moorings and dissolve into its surroundings as it also made a new home for itself there, its residues still persisting and circulating.

It may be helpful, at this point, to give an instance of a British surrealist encounter, or encounter with surrealism, in Britain. In June 1936, Dylan Thomas and his friend Daniel Jones went up to the International Surrealist Exhibition at the New Burlington Galleries in London; Thomas also took part in the festival that launched the exhibition. There they saw 'a complete tea-set made of squirrel's fur, the fur, of course, on the *inside*'.<sup>14</sup> This artwork was Meret Oppenheim's 1936 *Objet*, later titled *Déjeuner en fourrure*, or *Breakfast in Fur*. Oppenheim's *Objet* is a classic example of a Surréaliste readymade – an object which, found in its everyday state, lends itself to the surreal when interrupted or cut off from its immediate reality, or an item fashioned from an unlikely collision of objects. *Objet* holds multiple source-materials in suspension together: it's really a tea-set beneath the fur, and also an animal, or the remains of one. It's yonic, playing on feminine decorum and high tea, as well as goings-on beneath the skin or skirts. But Jones, in his account of encountering *Objet*, makes a telling slip: the fur Oppenheim used came from a Chinese gazelle (now better known as Przewalski's gazelle, and presently endangered) – not a squirrel. Jones's error is emblematic of the tricky, imprecise reactions readymades invite as you try to figure them out or taxonomise exactly what they are. It also presents an example of a British surrealist impulse to domesticate or provincialise the bohemian, continental spirit it borrowed from. Jones and Thomas grew up in Wales, distanced from the modernist buzz of London, and further still from Paris or Europe, where exotic furs might be more readily encountered. The ocelot confections or architectural monkey furs of Elsa Schiaparelli, for instance, a collaboration with whom prompted Oppenheim to make *Objet* in the first place.<sup>15</sup> You couldn't guess what animal an object was made from if that animal was itself outside your frame of reference; encountering something new for the first time you might instead relate it to something more familiar or local to you. Jones's and

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Jones, *My Friend Dylan Thomas* (London 1977) p. 58.

<sup>15</sup> See Ghislaine Wood, 'Surreal Things: Making "the Fantastic Real"', in Ghislaine Wood (ed.), *Surreal Things: Surrealism and Design* (London 2007) pp. 2–15: 11–12.

Thomas's encounter with Oppenheim's *Objet* constitutes an instance both of the classically Surréaliste principle of being estranged by an encounter with art, and also of the encounter this essay is most interested in – that of the British with surrealism.

The questions surrealism in Britain asked of itself were concerned, consistently, with the time and nature of its arrival, its pedigree as part of the extant British literary canon, when something was surrealist and when it wasn't. There was, unsurprisingly, no consensus on any of these problems – the confusion that dogged notions of British surrealism's origin, definition, and end is quite apt for an artistic movement which was itself concerned with undoing the boundaries of dream and waking, and establishing a certain spatio-temporal impossibility. A key concept in approaching how British surrealism was encountered is Remy's articulation of *provincialisation*. An exotic scrap of fur is converted into a bit of fluff from a common or garden grey squirrel, and manifestations of surrealism in Britain seemed to go native, as a foreign thing in a foreign land. This is, Remy has pointed out, an extension of the movement's internationalism rather than a retreat from it:

Surrealism has always strongly emphasised that it was international. The corollary was that the expansion of surrealism should not develop solely outwards, but also within one and the same country. In other words, to the process of internationalisation there must correspond a process of *provincialisation*.<sup>16</sup>

Considering British surrealist encounters through the lens of the provincial, or provincialising impulse, is a certain way of understanding its stops and false starts as part of its process rather than as failures or misfires. Surrealism in Britain stretched out, or stretched its legs; it got lost as it got local, and this – as Remy implies – was not its weakness but its strength. For while Surréaliste artworks were exhibited in Britain, they were also reconstituted or domesticated through provincialising recognitions, and British writers and artists, too, found surrealism at home. When Cyril Connolly reviewed David Gascoyne's *Short Survey of Surrealism* for the *New Statesman and Nation* in December 1935, in a piece titled 'It's Got Here at Last!', he recommended it 'To all who enjoy provocative reading or the sending of Christmas presents which may explode at breakfast'.<sup>17</sup> It's

<sup>16</sup> Michel Remy, 'Towards the Magnetic North: Surrealism in Birmingham', in *Surrealism in Birmingham*, pp. 7–14: 7.

<sup>17</sup> Cyril Connolly, 'It's got here at last!', *New Statesman and Nation*, 10/251, 4 Dec. 1935, p. 946.

funny, but over-cute; dealt with over breakfast, surrealism is like a prank, curiosity, or mischief – a piece of village gossip which might cause a nuisance, and that shouldn't be taken too seriously. 'It's got here at last!' is a phrase that does not quite know its subject (a vague 'It', like a contagion, rumour, or season) as it does not know how to behave towards it – both, apparently, with a touch of celebration and horror. But exactly how and when 'It got here' is a question that resists simple answers, depending on what you term an 'arrival', or a work of certifiable surrealism. Gascoyne himself made the argument in his book that surrealism 'is an activity of the mind, and cannot be limited to any one particular time or place'.<sup>18</sup> Connolly's 'at last', for one, indicates an anglophone awareness of surrealism before it officially 'arrived' on our shores. Indeed, Remy argues that 1936, when the 'Surrealist Group in England' was formally founded, 'can be rightly considered as the year that demonstrated definitively that surrealism had *already* permeated Britain'.<sup>19</sup>

It is difficult to determine when the word 'Surréalisme' first appeared, in print at least, on British shores. 'As early as 1925', Rob Jackaman notes, 'Surréalisme' was being mentioned very occasionally in the *Criterion's* "Foreign Reviews" and "French Periodicals" sections.<sup>20</sup> That which is 'permeated' is spread about, or suffused with the matter it mixes with; permeating Britain, becoming provincial, and cropping up in odd reviews and reports, surrealism was no longer the strictly defined or discrete movement that had grown up in Paris. It was the anglophone Parisian magazine *transition*, edited by Eugene Jolas and founded in 1927, which made a definite claim to being the first publication 'to introduce Surrealism' – or at least surrealist *work* – 'to the English-speaking world', 'publish[ing] in English versions of the work of the leading Surrealist writers and reproduc[ing] the work of Surrealist painters at a time when Surrealism was unknown'.<sup>21</sup> Jolas's claim has been generally unchallenged: from 1927 to 1938, *transition* published work by Surréalistes such as Paul Éluard, Breton, and Robert Desnos, translated into English, and art by Max Ernst, Giorgio de Chirico, and Man Ray. But *transition* was also wide-ranging in its tastes: Hart Crane, Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, H.D., Louis Zukofsky, Djuna Barnes, and Samuel Beckett all found their way into the pages of the magazine. So, if *transition* was the first publication to drip-feed Surréaliste work into anglophone literary consciousness, it did so with a particular dilution alongside broader Anglo-American modernisms; while a substantial part of the

<sup>18</sup> Gascoyne, *A Short Survey of Surrealism*, pp. 93–4.

<sup>19</sup> Remy, 'Hearts on Fire', p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> Rob Jackaman, *The Course of English Surrealist Poetry since the 1930s* (Lewiston, NY 1989) p. 25.

<sup>21</sup> Eugene Jolas, *transition*, 22 (Feb. 1933) p. 182.

magazine's output, surrealism was rarely singled out as especially distinct. The readers who came to *transition* found surrealism not as a discrete or exclusive movement, but as just one of various experimental modes at play for encounter or adoption.

Jolas's claim for *transition*, however, is not quite watertight, and surrealism's indefinite presence in British or anglophone publications has other roots. Thinking about surrealism's admixture with broader Anglo-American modernisms, we might turn to a particular essay written in 1929 by an Oxford undergraduate. This essay is Édouard Roditi's 'The New Reality', published in Clere Parsons's *Oxford Outlook*; in five pages, Roditi offers a cutting view of high modernism, before looking forward to surrealism's progress in Britain. An essay by an undergraduate, published in an undergraduate magazine, Roditi's piece has hardly been considered in modernist or surrealist studies. 'It has so far escaped the notice of most critics that modernism in literature is no longer new', he notes; 'there are two generations in modernism: one which has established itself as a tradition, and one which is still in revolt.'<sup>22</sup> Addressing the established modernist 'tradition', Roditi lists writers who, 'after much experimenting, have achieved their objects' – 'Eliot has found purity of style and a perfect classicism . . . Stein has produced entirely abstract prose . . . Pound's cantos are the fruit of years of experimenting in every form of verse'.<sup>23</sup> Roditi observes these poets' practices on the assumption that they have already settled; Eliot may have found a 'perfect classicism' at one point, but that doesn't mean he went on to stick to it. But the thing these poets have in common, according to Roditi, is their 'precision'; it is this 'precision' which constitutes the 'starting-point' of younger modernist generations: 'A starting-point is a point that one leaves behind; in literature one revolts against a starting-point' – so the young modernist poet 'must therefore revolt by bringing an element of chance into his poetry'.<sup>24</sup> And, 'this element of chance is *surréalisme*'.<sup>25</sup>

Roditi's understanding of surrealism is not as a foreign body incorporated into British artistic practices, but as a logical successor to the high modernism of Eliot or Pound – a form, even the predominant form, of later modernism. Surrealism, it seems, may be a natural product of encountering a certain modernist establishment. Roditi's essay is compelling for its argument, and also for its style. Two passages in particular stand out. First, his note that

<sup>22</sup> Édouard Roditi, 'The New Reality', *The Oxford Outlook*, ed. Clere Parsons, 10/49 (June 1929) pp. 295–300: 295.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 296.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.



There are moments in the life of every true poet when poetry is no longer a geranium in a flower-pot on his window-sill and beauty no longer wears a capital B like a green dress from Paquin; but when beauty is an accident and poetry an inexplicable miracle. The words come naturally with the speed of a murderous wind or of barley-sugar disappearing into the mouth of a small boy in his dreams; and their meaning is no longer a purpose but an accident. The writer is no longer a person but an accident.<sup>26</sup>

Then, later, his declaration that this deliberate imprecision, or commitment to inexplicable accident,

is the new reality: the reality of the night, of the brilliant sunlight, the reality of dreams, hallucinations, and of prophecies announced in the singing heat of noon; the reality of visions which later are interpreted as religions, philosophies, and metaphysics; the reality of symbols before they have been proved to be symbols . . . The birds dream darkly and the prophet sees his own profile reflected upon a passing cloud; the trees turn in spirals towards the singing sun and a curious small dark animal appears from among the thick jungle-grass of the infinite. This is the new reality this animal is the new reality [*sic*].<sup>27</sup>

There is a particular resonance in this later passage with Breton's closing images from his first 'Manifeste du surréalisme': 'Cet été les roses sont bleues; le bois c'est du verre. La terre drapée dans sa verdure me fait aussi peu d'effet qu'un revenant. C'est vivre et cesser de vivre qui sont des solutions imaginaires. L'existence est ailleurs.'<sup>28</sup> Sunlight, hallucination, phantoms, flora, and greenery all find themselves dispersed between Breton's and Roditi's texts. There is no certain way of knowing whether Roditi had read the 'Manifeste', though the parallels are notable; if he did, however – and it seems likely – it tells us something about the ways in which surrealism had 'already permeated', in Remy's phrase, some literary and cultural criticism, even by 1930. Roditi's writing is florid, and can be awkward: that 'their meaning is no longer a purpose but an accident' might strike you at first as a misprint – surely it should be *on* purpose – before his following sentence revises and compacts, making the writer 'no longer a

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 299.

<sup>28</sup> Breton, 'Manifeste du surréalisme', p. 60. 'This summer the roses are blue; the wood is [made] of glass. The earth, draped in its greenery, has so little effect on me that it might as well be a ghost. It's living and then ceasing to live which are imaginary solutions. Existence is elsewhere.'

person but an accident'. A correlation is established between a person, and (their) purpose in writing. The idea that both purpose and person may be an 'accident' tacitly references surrealism's long-term interest in automatic writing processes, designed to expose the unconscious, unmitigated by style or preference. Literary production, Roditi implies, is circumstantial: a matter of reaction and response rather than the deliberate or conscious introduction of movements or processes. Surrealism is incorporated into a study of modernist literary influence and succession, and centred in Roditi's manifesto-like essay ('This is the new reality this animal is the new reality') as the future of Anglo-American modernism.

Roditi's argument to understand surrealism in Britain as modernism's next move is not one that has been remembered by literary history, for all its merits or potential. He was, however, not alone in his project to embed surrealist encounters within British literary culture. 'From the first appearance of Surrealism in this country', Kitty Hauser notes, 'attempts were made to endow [surrealism] with native roots'; these roots may be grafted or replanted, but are not therefore inorganic.<sup>29</sup> Writing in 1935, Gascoyne anticipated that 'In England there will be many to protest that Surrealism is foreign to the national temperament, that it cannot grow here as it has no roots in English tradition. As a matter of fact, there is a very strong element in English literature.'<sup>30</sup> Gascoyne cites Shakespeare, Marlowe, Swift, Coleridge, Blake, Lear, and Carroll as surrealist forebears; Read added Donne and Hopkins.<sup>31</sup> In making these canonical claims, Gascoyne and Read borrowed a technique from Breton, who in his first manifesto claimed a retroactive surrealism for the Marquis de Sade, Victor Hugo, Baudelaire, and Rimbaud, among many others. Read and Gascoyne's manipulation of British literature pays homage to Breton's own argument for surrealism's transcendental relationship to history, and the effect of this particular grafting is to make us do a double-take at the canon. Shakespeare's flights of metaphor, Donne's metaphysics, Swift's satires, and Lear's nonsense not only become the product of their own historical contexts but acquire new spheres of significance outside straightforward literary inheritances. It is an objectifying of British literature to surrealist ends, where these canonical touchstones can be converted into prophetic readymades. They are re-encountered, both as works written within and

<sup>29</sup> Kitty Hauser, *Shadow Sites: Photography, Archaeology, and the British Landscape 1927–1955* (Oxford 2007) p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> Gascoyne, *A Short Survey of Surrealism*, p. 95.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94; Herbert Read, Introduction to *id.* (ed.), *Surrealism* (London 1971) pp. 19–91: 30–1.

for their times and, suddenly, agents in the service of a twentieth-century movement which itself had a healthy disregard for temporal convention.

But what these canonical texts know about their apparent surrealist sympathies, too, is ambiguous; it is unclear whether Gascoyne and Read see them as coincidental works which lend themselves to a cause or instead as a more premeditated set of progressions towards 'surrealism'. Neither Gascoyne nor Read gives textual examples, dodging the responsibility of justifying their identification of surrealist character or practice. This attempt to lodge surrealism firmly on the library shelf is a move at least partially born of anxiety, or defence against those who might dismiss surrealism as continental frippery or avant-garde indulgence.<sup>32</sup> Involving forms and genres as various as early modern theatre, satirical tracts, holy sonnets, and nonsense verse in surrealist histories, Read and Gascoyne's claims for a new literary history of British surrealism expand the terms of exactly what surrealism might be. No longer predicated purely on methods of automatism, surrealism is established as an affect or even apparition in the British literary imagination of the 1930s, reflected back onto history. This understanding, of British surrealism having uncertain beginnings, has been sensitively reflected in recent studies or retrospectives on the movement. An exhibition on British surrealism, curated by David Boyd Haycock at the Dulwich Picture Gallery in 2020, included a print of Henry Fuseli's *The Nightmare* (1781) and sketches from Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), and displayed early editions of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1620), as well as works by Lear and Horace Walpole and notebooks from Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The question of where surrealism may have first been encountered in Britain can be extended backwards, apparently indefinitely.

British surrealism's uncertain roots came to characterise the way it behaved as a movement throughout the 1930s, and it was epitomised, too, by the profiles of the artists who were attracted to it. Thomas, for instance, while happy enough to participate in the 1936 Exhibition in London, touring the galleries with a cup of boiled string and asking whether people would like it 'weak or strong', had already privately denied that he ever 'could be' a surrealist, on the grounds that he had 'very little idea what

<sup>32</sup> J. B. Priestley, for one, was unimpressed with the efforts of the 1936 International Surrealist Exhibition; Geoffrey Grigson reports him calling Read a 'nit-wit', asking, 'Did you go to that Surrealist opening? There was Herbert Read with all those Latin charlatans. Henry Moore's stuff was there. Henry Moore: he's lumpy. I don't know why all this modern stuff needs to be lumpy. What's there so attractive about eggy things?' Grigson adds, 'It was not Mr. Priestley speaking. It was the public, honestly puzzled ... bitter to nonconformists of the small battalion'; Ray, *The Surrealist Movement in England*, pp. 152–3.

surrealism is'.<sup>33</sup> Thomas did not particularly stick around, other than as an occasional social attachment – other writers and artists, however, were more comfortable associating with surrealism in Britain, and working within its ambit. A special 1939 edition of the *London Bulletin*, the British surrealists' official publication, profiled the work of numerous artists from both within and outside the surrealist movement. These proponents of 'Living Art in England' included named surrealists, among them Agar, Jennings, Conroy Maddox, and Roland Penrose, as well as 'Independent Artists' Ithell Colquhoun and Ceri Richards (both of whom identified as surrealists at one point or another), 'Urrealists', and 'Constructivists' including Naum Gabo, Barbara Hepworth, and Piet Mondrian.<sup>34</sup> A rose by any other name, we know, would smell as sweet, and the difference between, say, a 'Surrealist' and an 'Urrealist' is not glossed or commented on. Instead, by publishing these other 'categories' of artist alongside named surrealist proponents, the *Bulletin* acknowledged the relevance and interconnectedness of contemporary artistic movements of the 1930s. This spread of the movement in Britain was not only a healthy bastardisation but could also be seen to reflect the philosophical turns of Surréalisme proper; Breton's second manifesto of 1929, Rod Mengham points out, 'showed much more interest in the surrealism of everyday life, in the attempt to discover where "surreality resides in reality itself" – in material reality and in a public, social world'.<sup>35</sup>

Indefinite and drifting, British surrealist works or incidents were liable to crop up out of nowhere before disappearing once again, embedded already in literary history or the more recent turns of modernism. Laxton's figure of the 'strolling surrealist' is particularly helpful here for thinking about British surrealism's peripatetic nature, since it was on walks or on holidays that certain artists worked. Nash, Hauser notes, 'found "natural" occurrences of Surrealism in the landscape, making it seem – literally – a home-grown product'.<sup>36</sup> Identifying what he termed a 'Seaside Surrealism' in his local town of Swanage, Nash found an 'involuntary "Swanage modernism" in the "Swan-like seats designed for the esplanade by the Swanage Urban District Council"', as well as in the objects he found shored up on the coast there, 'Incongruous and slightly frightening in their relation to time and

<sup>33</sup> Remy, 'Hearts on Fire', p. 3; Dylan Thomas to Richard Church, 9 Dec. 1935, in *The Collected Letters*, ed. Paul Ferris, 2nd edn. (London 2000) pp. 231–2: 232.

<sup>34</sup> *London Bulletin*, 8–9 (Jan./Feb. 1939) pp. 8–44.

<sup>35</sup> Rod Mengham, 'Bourgeois News: Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge', *Jacket*, 20 (Dec. 2002), <<http://jacketmagazine.com/20/meng-jen-madg.html>> [accessed 13 Oct. 2018].

<sup>36</sup> Hauser, *Shadow Sites*, p. 15.

place'.<sup>37</sup> Nash's surrealism in Swanage engaged with materials both organic and man-made. The seaside town, Alexandra Harris tells us, was littered with 'Victorian bedposts, bollards and door-knockers', the result of Victorian entrepreneur and mayor George Burt importing 'architectural salvage from London to provide ornamentation'.<sup>38</sup> So, in the 1930s, Nash found 'ornate ironwork leaning in fields, and Hanover Square lamps on the quay', displaced from their intending settings and re-encountered with a surrealist sensibility in mind.<sup>39</sup> The corollary to the 'man-made' surrealism Nash identified in Swanage, however, were the region's own 'archaeological oddities', or the natural found objects Nash stumbled across in the British countryside.<sup>40</sup> It was on Romney marsh, in the wetlands of Kent and East Sussex, that Nash found or made his first readymade in 1933: a piece of driftwood retrieved from a stream which caught his eye, and happened to remind him of a Henry Moore sculpture. He showed it at the 1936 exhibition under the title *Marsh Personage*.<sup>41</sup> A 'personage' is a person, sometimes an important one, or a body; also (historically) the representation of a person, an image or effigy.<sup>42</sup> Nash's readymade is both character and body, representation and the thing represented. It puns as it metonymically involves British landscapes with surrealist art. Surrealism, it seemed, had always been there, lurking in your local marsh or seaside town: it just depends how you look at it.

Nash is a valuable writer and artist to consider in relation to surrealism's progress in Britain, since he was already well established by the time it arrived, and went on to other projects (such as founding Unit One with Moore and Hepworth) when he moved on from it. So, Andrew Causey notes, Nash's art was 'broadened by Surrealism', but 'not fundamentally altered by it' – 'he never allowed that Surrealism was something completely new'.<sup>43</sup> Nash, Ian Walker notes, 'had no interest in the politics or polemics of Surrealism': instead, it was the 'poetics of displacement and estrangement to which he responded and reworked to his own ends'.<sup>44</sup> He even once told Read, 'As you know I do not pretend to be a member of

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.; Nash, 'Swanage', p. 126.

<sup>38</sup> Alexandra Harris, 'Seaside Ceremonies: Coastal Rites in Twentieth-Century Art', in Lara Feigel and Alexandra Harris (eds.), *Modernism on Sea: Art and Culture at the British Seaside* (Oxford 2009) pp. 227–43: 235.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> David Boyd Haycock, *Paul Nash* (London 2002) p. 73.

<sup>42</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'personage', n., 1a, b, 2a, 3.

<sup>43</sup> Andrew Causey, *Paul Nash* (Oxford 1980) p. 262.

<sup>44</sup> Ian Walker, *So Exotic, So Homemade: Surrealism, Englishness and Documentary Photography* (Manchester 2007) p. 10.

the Surrealist Party. I did not find Surrealism, Surrealism found me.’<sup>45</sup> This statement is itself a canny play on surrealist theories of encounter, but also forms a template for considering surrealism in Britain, as a sensibility that could not be entirely plotted, but instead emerged or could be engaged with through the framework of chance meetings and contingency. Surrealism in Britain was already ‘displac[ed]’ or ‘estrang[ed]’ from its French source; it should be no surprise, then, that it was enacted with a certain poetics of awkward displacement.

Carefully entangled with the literary canon, British surrealism was not strictly – or only – ‘found’ by artists; it found them. Surrealism spoke to Nash’s ongoing artistic practices, as Hauser highlights:

Nash’s attraction to old stones and buried skeletons was allied to his Surrealist sensibility. Ancient and strange objects, newly found, were what excited Nash’s artistic imagination, and could easily be absorbed into both his commitment to Surrealism (as *objets trouvés*) and his attachment to the British landscape (as archaeological remains).<sup>46</sup>

What you find in a marsh can lend itself both to legacies of surrealism, the avant-garde, and what might be dredged up from the subconscious of memory or earth via the transporting incident of the encounter, and also to more historicist retracings of landscape and influence, in an earthy parallel to Read’s and Gascoyne’s retroactive canonising. But ‘found’ by surrealism himself, Nash was subsequently responsible for it ‘finding’ others, including the artist Eileen Agar. One of the stars of the 1936 Exhibition, Agar ‘had apparently not thought of herself as a “Surrealist” until Penrose and Herbert Read (recommended by Nash) came to her studio and declared her to be one’, discovering her in the name of a movement she had not previously recognised.<sup>47</sup> After a little while, repeated encounters can become a type of familiarity, or plotted introduction; Nash, introduced to surrealism himself, orchestrated Agar’s introduction in turn. Surrealism, left to dwell among diverse artistic practices, seems to undergo a certain transformation: registered less as a foreign object, and more as a familiar condition or affect. The shore-side encounter found its expression in Agar’s practice, too: her *Marine Object* (1939) was assembled from a fragmented Greek amphora she found on the shores of Carqueiranne; she added to it crustaceans and flotsam she’d found years earlier on the Côte d’Azur, then a ram’s horn she came across walking (‘strolling’) in

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Hauser, *Shadow Sites*, p. 129.

<sup>47</sup> Walker, *So Exotic*, p. 52.

Cumberland. It's a collage of the residue of encounter, all things which might – in some flight of fancy or subjunctive future – have shored up together, now united in a sculptural collage which throws time out of joint. For example, did Agar begin the work when she found the first pieces of her sculpture, or the last; or somewhere between these precise instances, when the impulse to combine them came to her? When does a collection become an artwork, and what happens when the traces of an artwork began sometime before you were found to be a surrealist? The question of where and when surrealism *happens* dogged its manifestations in Britain, where it found its displacement and awkwardness apt, and in fact generative of work – such as Nash's, or Agar's – which not only constituted acts worthy of Breton's 'SURREALISME ABSOLU', but also carried out the dispersal of surrealist spirit which Breton's second manifesto encouraged, indefiniteness and uncertainty being central to the moment of the surrealist encounter.<sup>48</sup>

Beachcombing, in particular, finesses the generative interactions that British surrealism derived so much of its momentum from. It is as if Surréalisme, in its bits and pieces, washed up readily fragmented on Britain's shores. Read was subject to these shoreline temptations too:

If I am walking along the beach and my eye catches a sea-worn and sun-bleached knot of wood whose shape and colour strongly appeal to me, the act of identification . . . makes that object as expressive of my personality as if I had actually carved the wood into that shape. Selection is also creation . . . Art in its widest sense is an extension of the personality: a host of artificial limbs.<sup>49</sup>

Between Nash, Agar and Read, British surrealism seems at home, beachcombing. The 'artificial limbs' Read describes constitute the bodily involvement readymades, or the surrealist encounter, might invite, offering the strolling, browsing individual both a liberation of place and conventional semantics and a vertigo which threatens bodily autonomy. Read's 'extension' nods to, and displaces, Eliot's 'extinction of personality', in a kind of 're-membling' which might remind you of Roditi's framing of surrealism in Britain as a bold new extension of high modernism.<sup>50</sup> Perception, here, is a collage-ing impulse to cut out, but also a subsequent grafting of ourselves onto the thing perceived in a move towards mutual

<sup>48</sup> Breton, 'Manifeste', p. 26.

<sup>49</sup> Read, Introduction to *Surrealism*, p. 64.

<sup>50</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London 1975) pp. 37–44: 40.

contingency, an improvising desire to stage a form of surrealism with whatever materials make themselves available. Breton's promise that 'L'existence est ailleurs' opened up a precedent for surrealism to be productively diluted, and derive its spirit precisely from this dilution, with new opportunities for juxtaposition, resemblance of place, and forms of existence outside the bounds of one's own body.<sup>51</sup>

Making the case for his Swanage surrealism, Nash cited Breton's suggestion that

A statue in a street or some place where it would normally be found is just a statue, as it were, in its right mind; but a statue in a ditch or in the middle of a ploughed field is then an *object in a state of surrealism*.<sup>52</sup>

As surrealism got lost in British landscapes, what seemed to stick was the perception of surreality rather than the strictly defined, manifested and manifest Surréalisme of Paris; there's a move to the adjectival, an appropriate diffusion of definite meaning. Surrealism increasingly belonged in the eye of the beholder, existing more and more as a contingent phantom only and relying on you being in your right mind – or rather *outside* it – in the wrong place at the right time, when you encountered it. Surrealism, here, is not a movement adhered to but something more like an effect or appearance perceived. Something can look surreal even if it doesn't mean to be – that, many surrealists would stress, is exactly the point. As early as 1938, Henry Treece observed that

‘Surrealism,’ like many of the other catch-phrases popular at the moment is a label which can easily be attached nowadays to any literary or pictorial work that does not comply with accepted formulae, that does not offer its own solution, simply laid out on a salver.<sup>53</sup>

Treece's characterisation of surrealism as a bandied-about 'catchphrase' or 'catch'-all is emblematic of surrealism's place in British literary spheres as a source of influence or an adjectival descriptor of effect rather than an ideological commitment. Treece does gloss over, however, the fact that surrealism did originally have 'accepted formulae' of its own: the apparently automatic or *outré*, explosive or eccentric; or, perhaps, anything recognisable as any of these things. British surrealism was predicated less on

<sup>51</sup> Breton, 'Manifeste', p. 60. 'Existence is elsewhere.'

<sup>52</sup> Nash, 'Swanage', p. 126.

<sup>53</sup> Henry Treece, 'Dylan Thomas and the Surrealists', *Seven; the new magazine*, 3 (Winter 1938) pp. 27–30: 27.



adherence to ‘accepted formulae’ and more on perceived relation to or recognition of these formulaic traces.

British artists, Walker observes,

Took Surrealism out for a walk – into the fields, past the factories and along the beach, places it hadn’t been to before . . . All these juxtapositions of ancient and modern urban and rural, man-made and natural . . . the obvious and the unknown, the important and the trivial, the so exotic and the so homemade, point forward to yet more possibilities that remain both provocative and productive.<sup>54</sup>

Walker is, I think, quite right, though in light of Nash or Agar both being discovered *by* surrealism, it may be more accurate to reframe these encounters as surrealism taking British artists for a walk rather than the other way around. Surrealism is a phenomenon best recalled via its residues or pieces, rather than any of its attempts at ideological cohesion – fragments from magazine cultures of the 1930s, chance meetings and encounters between British writers and artists and unlikely décor, or eerily magnetic driftwood. Volatile and incohesive, the anecdotal and piecemeal are what persist: ‘we keep being haunted’, Harris notes, ‘by the bits . . . which have had to be pruned off’.<sup>55</sup> What you found, or rather what found you. If this seems whimsical, it’s because it is; letting the Surréaliste spirit conjured in Paris drift from its moorings across the Channel and disperse almost entirely, to be stumbled on and reawakened from its slumber on shorelines or the library shelf, British artists took the movement to its logical conclusion. A lively phantom which overturns the familiar and embraces the already strange, surrealism in Britain centred the excitement of encounter as a form of liberation from definition, with the certain saving grace of being found.

<sup>54</sup> Walker, *So Exotic*, p. 182.

<sup>55</sup> Harris, ‘Seaside Ceremonies’, p. 238.